THEATRICALITY AND PERFORMANCE IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Performance and theatricality have become key terms for scholars working across wide reaches of Victorian studies. Closely related and multiply resonant as they are, I will not attempt to disentangle them here. Thomas Postlewait and Tracy Davis in defining just one of these terms suggest that:

> the idea of theatricality has achieved an extraordinary range of meanings, making it everything from an act to an attitude, a style to a semiotic system, a medium to a message. It is a sign empty of meaning; it is the meaning of all signs. Depending on one's perspective, it can be dismissed as little more than a self-referential gesture or it can be embraced as a definitive feature of human communication. Although it obviously derives its meanings from the world of theatre, *theatricality* can be abstracted from the theatre itself and then applied to any and all aspects of human life.[1]

We see how richly useful and widely usable these terms are in the diverse approaches demonstrated by the work gathered in this issue of *Victorian Network*. These are not articles purely about the theatre but they do recognise the importance, both metaphorically and literally, of theatricality and performance in a number of areas of nineteenth-century culture and society. As Tracy Davis and Peter Holland suggest, 'theatre and performance are currently embraced by Romantic and Victorian scholars alike as pervasive practices of the historical past.'[2] Not only do these terms help us access, discuss and connect up particular moments of cultural history, their significance has contributed to the opening up of new areas of scholarly interest. Over the past twenty to thirty years music hall, pantomime and melodrama have been investigated alongside the "legitimate" drama, just as work on popular magazines or penny dreadful fiction has flourished alongside continued interest in the realist novel. The fact that the latest issue of *Victorian Network* seeks to investigate these overlapping areas of interest is apposite, as the theatre, and indeed all other areas of Victorian culture, worked through networks. Whether these networks were social or economic, cultural production could not function without them. The network is

1 Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, 'Theatricality: an introduction' in *Theatricality* ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.
2 Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland, 'Introduction: the Performing Society' in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3.

particularly apparent when considering the theatre itself and the relationships between playwright, director, actors, managers, critics and audience. But as several of the essays here demonstrate, the interconnected networks of production and consumption into which their focus texts were launched often crossed generic boundaries. Indeed, since Martin Meisel's *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in the Nineteenth Century* (1983) explored the interconnectedness of the three areas of his title, and particularly the importance of theatrical metaphors in the visual arts and fiction writing, scholars have become more and more open to such connections. Katherine Newey suggests that many Victorians themselves had 'great confidence in the almost infinite capacity of the stage as an effective means of representation and communication, and its capacity to absorb and incorporate all other art forms.'[3] Deborah Vlock argues powerfully in her *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* that 'the tropes of the theatre gave voice to other forms of artistic and popular expression; people read novels, newspapers, social criticism – indeed, just about everything worth reading – through the lens of popular performance.'[4]

Many of the best known figures in Victorian culture worked across a number of networks which reached outside the field in which they are now best known (or most often pigeon holed). Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote successful plays, including *The Lady of Lyons* (1838), amidst his hectic schedule as a novelist. Henry James's hunger for the theatrical success that *Guy Domville* (1895) would not bring him is well documented. Wilkie Collins wrote thirteen plays between 1850 and 1885 while producing his best-selling sensation novels.[5] Charles Reade, too, flitted amongst the roles of novelist, playwright, and manager (he brought Ellen Terry out of retirement) while fellow sensation novelists Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Florence Marryat also fitted acting as well as writing for the stage into their busy fiction-writing careers. Bram Stoker, whose *Dracula* is examined in Leanne Page's article, famously worked as a secretary and manager for Sir Henry Irving during his years at the Lyceum. For many popular novelists, producing a dramatic version of their fiction was a means of capturing some of the profits that would otherwise go straight to the pirated play versions that were always attendant on the publication of a successful novel – often even before its serialisation had ended. Dickens was one among many irritated by this problem. Poets too turned to drama: Robert Browning, for example, had plays staged in the 1830s and the dramatic impetus of a volume like *Dramatis Personae* (1864) is

3 Katherine Newey, 'Speaking Pictures: The Victorian Stage and Visual Culture' in *Ruskin, the Theatre and Victorian Visual Culture*, ed. Anselm Heinrich, Katherine Newey and Jeffrey Richards (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

4 Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.

5 Richard Pearson's project to digitise Collins's plays has recently gone live at http://www.wilkiecollinsplays.net

fundamental to his work. Of course, some of those figures we know best for their dramatic work were also writing in other genres – Oscar Wilde being the most obvious example of a playwright who was also an author, poet and editor. Whilst twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship has often tried to categorise Victorian cultural producers into neat boxes (novelist, dramatist, journalist), the figures above, and many others, defy such attempts and ask us to consider the networked interconnections between their works amongst different genres.

Jonathan Buckmaster's essay turns to one of the figures central to debates about the relationships between Victorian forms of cultural production, namely Charles Dickens. There are many routes through which his attitude to the theatre and theatricality have been analysed: Dickens as the journalist commenting condescendingly on the stage in 'The Amusements of the People', Dickens as the sharp satirist of stage life in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), Dickens as enthusiastic amateur actor in *The Frozen Deep* (1866), and Dickens as addicted performer in his late readings.[6] Buckmaster adds fresh matter to these debates by turning to the less-read texts *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838) and 'The Pantomime of Life' (1837). He reads the slippage between "onstage" and "offstage" life, or the authentic and the performed, as potentially threatening as well as comic in these texts and sees them as foregrounding the importance of these themes in Dickens's later works. Alice Crossley's essay also focuses on the perceived dichotomies of the sincere and the performed, the public and the private, and uses Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1848-50) to put forward a convincing case that when it comes to the dandy-figures in the novel, performance, particularly through costume, can be a means of distracting attention away from the male body and actually maintaining its privacy. She demonstrates the ways in which the novel draws upon theatrical tropes and foregrounds the theatricality of high society life. Both Crossley and Buckmaster also key into wider debates concerning the relationship between the theatre and the novel. Scholars such as Joseph Litvak in *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (1992) and Emily Allen in *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (2003) have explored the attraction-repulsion paradigm; Crossley and Buckmaster, while acknowledging that both Dickens and Thackeray felt some ambivalence or anxiety towards the stage, emphasise reciprocity and interdependence between the genres.

Anjna Chouhan takes us to the late-Victorian stage and the figures of Oscar Wilde and Arthur Wing Pinero. Arguing that in the case of *The Schoolmistress* (1886) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895), the conservatory functions as an urban replacement for pastoral escape and allows Pinero and Wilde to send up those conventions associated with on-stage pastoral. Utilising a theory of theatrical phenomenology, Chouhan

6 See Edwin Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) amongst many others.

concurrently explores the role of the imagination, for both actor and audience, in investing in these offstage conservatory spaces. Leanne Page's article is also theoretically informed, although here it is technological performance, previously only applied to twentieth and twenty-first century technologies, that illuminates an analysis of *Dracula*. The practice of shorthand, and the apparatus of the phonograph and the typewriter are given fresh resonance in this analysis as their performances are connected to the fallible individuals in the novel, and are evaluated in social settings.

The theorising of different kinds of performance has been undertaken by scholars across disciplines such as Richard Schechner and Judith Butler.[7] It is Butler's influential ideas on performativity that several of these essays utilise. Her interest in the formation of the subject within gendered power structures, ultimately deriving from Foucault, has put her *Gender Trouble* (1990) on student reading lists across the arts and humanities. The postmodern contingency and constructedness of the gendered self, and of the body, brings performance off of the stage and into myriad other settings. Alice Crossley's article in particular demonstrates that while Butler's ideas come from a feminist perspective, they can also be put to use in the study of representations of masculinity. Jon McKenzie's work, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), here put to innovative use in Leanne Page's article, also comes out of a Foucauldian interest in the formation of the subject through particular kinds of discourse, echoing Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) in its very title. This type of theoretical work also allows us to rethink notions of theatricality and performance as insincere or disingenuous. When performance is perceived as inseparable from the formation and expression of the self, the question of insincerity becomes irrelevant. Victorian thinkers often found themselves asking similar questions about the compatibility of sincerity and acting. G. H. Lewes, for example, in his *Actors and Acting* (1875) suggested that an artificially created emotion could provide the route to an authentic one for accomplished actors.[8]

Theorising performance has not distracted scholars, particularly theatre historians, from digging through intransigent archives to try to increase our knowledge of the material conditions of theatrical practice in the nineteenth-century. Tracy Davis's meticulous work has helped us to understand the social position of the actress much more fully, and to complicate the narrative of 'the rise of the theatre' to cultural respectability by the end of the nineteenth century.[9] Katherine Newey has brought a

7 See, for example, Richard Schechner's important work in performance studies including *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and his *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Butler's most widely read works are *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

8 See Lynn Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004) for more on Lewes's work.

9 Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991). See Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croon Helm,

number of forgotten women playwrights to our attention in her *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (2005). Whilst the theatrical or the performed have often been defined as ephemeral and intangible, more and more work on reception history, audience composition, and the architectural spaces of performance help us get closer to the fleeting moment of performance. Ventures such as 'The Buried Treasures Project' which catalogued plays deposited at the Lord Chamberlain's Office between 1652 and 1863 and the 'Victorian Plays Project' (www.victorian.worc.ac.uk) which digitised 360 of Lacy's Acting Editions of plays performed around mid-century have facilitated access to the fundamentals of theatre research – the plays themselves. The London Music Hall Database provides further access for researchers interested in productions outside the prestige venues of the West-End.[10] Digitisation will continue to open up little-known texts and archives to scholarly research and will provide source materials for doctoral projects of the future.[11]

The stimulating articles collected here provide a number of entry points into key debates surrounding theatricality and performance and attest to the healthy state of postgraduate work in this area. The hard work and professionalism of the team working on *Victorian Network* have made it a pleasure to be involved with this issue.

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1978) for the narrative against which Davis writes.

10 See www.rhul.ac.uk/drama/music-hall/index.asp. See also the project run jointly between Birmingham and Lancaster universities: 'The Cultural Politics of English Pantomime, 1837-1901'. http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/drama/research/pantomime/index.aspx

11 For a fuller discussion of digitisation projects in relation to Victorian theatre see Caroline Radcliffe and Kate Mattacks, 'From Analogues to Digital: New Resources in Nineteenth-Century Theatre',*19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 8 (2009) http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/issue/view/71/showToc

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